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### The Visual Culture of: Prairie Schooner

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*Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln*

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*The Visual Culture of:*

# *Prairie Schooner*

Fall 1995 \$6.45



*1927-2001*

*October 10 - November 25, 2001*

# “The Visual Culture of *PRAIRIE SCHOONER*”

Daniel A. Siedell

*To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too.*  
Walt Whitman

The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden is pleased to present *The Visual Culture of PRAIRIE SCHOONER*, an exhibition of forty images from the pages of one of the more distinguished literary magazines in the country. Celebrating its seventy-fifth year of publication, the *Prairie Schooner* almost from the outset became a much sought-after venue for the publication of poems, short fiction, criticism, and personal essays for many of the nation's important and soon-to-be important writers. This exhibition explores the role that visual imagery has played in this important and influential magazine. If, as Henry Rago asserts, “a literary magazine is a form of conversation,” visual imagery has participated in and facilitated this conversation.<sup>1</sup>

Of the many important functions they serve, “little magazines” articulate and sustain creative communities. And visual imagery has played a subtle but nonetheless important role in building and maintaining a loyal and committed community of readers. No doubt these readers will be surprised that visual imagery has played any role whatsoever in *Prairie Schooner*, much less that it might actually possess something even remotely resembling a “visual culture.” But it does.

The intimate and complex relationship between the word and image is an important, but often unrecognized, part of the history of modern art.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 20th century, the manifesto and the artist's statement developed almost simultaneously with the emergence of a visual art that transcended language. Everywhere modern visual art is, language is close by. And, as this exhibition will show, everywhere language is, there will be visual imagery lurking somewhere. It might not be prominent, but it is there and thus worth taking seriously. From the perspective of visual and material culture, *Prairie Schooner* is much more than the sum of its literary contents. It has become a symbolically-charged artifact that has succeeded in creating a literary community, sustaining a “following,” and an “audience.”

The first issue of *Prairie Schooner*, published in January 1927, carried the following statement by editor Lowry C. Wimberly. “The *Prairie Schooner* is an outlet for literary work in the University of Nebraska and a medium for publication of the finest writing of the prairie country....”<sup>3</sup> And certainly, the very title of the magazine, “*Prairie Schooner*,” was intended to emblazon this regional emphasis in the minds of his readership. However, as the *Prairie Schooner*

developed, the image of the “prairie schooner” came to take on increasingly more complex metaphoric meaning as the publication sought to shape as well as respond to its changing audience. Visual imagery actively participated in this fascinating process.

As it appears on the covers of the earliest volumes of the literary quarterly, the image is simple, a covered wagon pulled by oxen and accompanied by a man whose wife sits inside (**fig. 3**). Far from dominating the cover, this postage-stamp woodblock image visually underscores and reiterates the text. Art historian David Morgan's research on 19th-century religious tracts and pamphlets is informative. According to Morgan, the postage-stamp woodblock prints that adorned these tracts sought to affirm the truth of the “word” through a visually-consistent and striking image, that “lures” the reader—or potential convert—into investigating the contents.<sup>4</sup> Wimberly's use of visual imagery followed the guidelines of 19th-century didactic imagery that supported and underscored, even attracted, the reader to the word. Karl Shapiro, however, who became editor in 1956 upon Wimberly's retirement, represented a distinctively different aesthetic.

In Shapiro, *Prairie Schooner* found a poet who was already part

complexity of the world of culture. In their own ways and within the possibilities of their own historical moments, each of the editors of the *Prairie Schooner* has recognized that visual imagery plays an important role in creating and sustaining what, according to Walt Whitman, poets need most: a great audience.



fig. 2, volume 69, no.1 (Spring 1995) Detail of *Caught* by Barbara Kendrick.



of the East Coast literary establishment, the same establishment Wimberly had sought to circumvent with the quarterly nearly thirties years earlier. One of the so-called “New York Intellectuals,” those men and women of letters whose Judaism added considerably to the texture of cultural discourse, Shapiro’s arrival in Lincoln signaled a significant shift in the scope of the *Prairie Schooner*.<sup>5</sup>

Immediately upon his arrival, Shapiro began to distance *Prairie Schooner* from its regional origins.<sup>6</sup> First, Shapiro dropped the “prairie” from the title, referring to the publication simply as the “schooner” (as did all the others who contributed to that first issue). Second, Shapiro emphasized the national focus the magazine had developed early in the thirties. And lastly, he abandoned the well-known covered wagon emblem on the cover in favor of a more elaborate and more “modern” abstract design, which seemed to be adapted from the “international” abstract-geometric style then dominate in contemporary architecture, sculpture, and painting. The covered wagon image was turned into a sleek semi-abstract “schooner” that was moved from the cover to the table of contents page. His re-design of the *Prairie Schooner* cover attempted not only to equate its contents with the literary vanguard, but to reassert the autonomy of the literary by eliminating visual illustration. Ironically, this was accomplished in part through an alternative visual aesthetic.

Indeed, Shapiro “nudged *Prairie Schooner* from its position as a regional journal and transformed it into a national literary phenomenon that readers all across

the country began to follow with interest and excitement.”<sup>7</sup> But he did so by transforming the regionalist image of “prairie schooner” into a useful and powerful metaphor for avant-gardists who have used their “underground” or “marginalized” status as a badge of honor. Like the Judeo-Christian theological doctrine of the “faithful remnant,” avant-gardism has thrived for two hundred years by

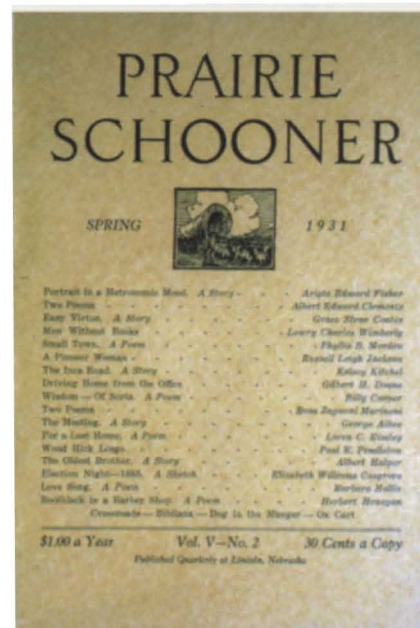


fig. 3, volume 5, no. 2 (Spring 1932).

defining itself as a minority community operating in opposition to the dominant culture. As a liberal Jewish New York intellectual working for a poorly-funded little magazine on the campus of a conservative prairie university, Shapiro was all too familiar with the blessings and curses of marginalization and exile.

Although his desire to rename the publication was short-lived, as were his subtle but important changes in the use of visual imagery, Shapiro’s anti-regional-

ism and explicit avant-gardism set the stage for subsequent editors to assimilate both the regionalism of Wimberly and the avant-gardism of Shapiro. After Shapiro resigned in 1963 over a censorship controversy with the University of Nebraska, poet and Willa Cather scholar Bernice Slote assumed the editorship. Slote and her successor, Hugh Luke (1980-87), resolved this Wemberly-Shapiro tension and their increased use of visual imagery played an important part in this process. About the meaning and significance of *Prairie Schooner*, Slote observed that the name of the quarterly communicated “not regionalism but a spirit of...adventure and action and endurance that could have some significance.”<sup>8</sup> Slote embraced Shapiro’s desire to make the *Prairie Schooner* transcend its local, regional, and parochial origins. She regarded the “prairie schooner” to be a metaphor for U.S. avant-gardism, a metaphor with a distinguished pedigree in 20th-century U.S. letters. But as a Cather scholar, Slote celebrated the role of “Prairie Intellectuals,” such as Nebraskans Mari Sandoz, Cather, Weldon Kees, and Wright Morris to U.S. culture.

Slote and later Hugh Luke accomplished this in part through a more liberal and diverse use of visual imagery. Both editors began to utilize and integrate different visual images on the cover design of their issues, images that were intended to relate to the subject or theme of that particular publication. One of the earliest of these designs is a 1971 issue devoted to children’s poetry in which a three-year old’s drawing of a duck adorns the cover (fig. 4). Unlike Wimberly’s use of visual imagery, which was limited to a 19th-century-style woodblock illustration “branding” the publica-

tion, and Shapiro's use of a distinctive, but generically, "modern" non objective style as a "visual backdrop," Slote and Luke integrated visual imagery into the "content" of the publications, which were used to expand the meaning of each issue. In addition, visual imagery even found its way "into" the publication.

The cover of the fiftieth anniversary issue, published in Spring 1977 featured a reproduction of a painting by George Ault from the collection of the Nebraska Art Association at the Sheldon Art Gallery. Five more paintings from the Sheldon's collection were reproduced in the issue, and, as the editor states, "all from the period of the 1920s and 1930s—the beginning years of *Prairie Schooner*" (p. 54). This issue marked the earliest attempt by the *Prairie Schooner* to integrate fine art thematically into the publication, explicitly weaving the visual and the literary arts, and doing so with the assistance of the collections at Sheldon Art Gallery.

Hilda Raz succeeded Hugh Luke as editor in 1987 and, with designer Dika Eckersley (who had designed the publication since 1983), aggressively extended and expanded the scope of visual imagery in the *Prairie Schooner*. She sought at once to integrate the visual imagery with the contents of the publication more creatively and to allow it to take on an aesthetic life of its own. Raz gave Eckersley unprecedented license to design visually provocative covers, such as her photograph of a pink rubber scrubbing glove on the front and back covers in fall 1995 (cover). Not only are Eckersley's compositions striking but they reveal a subtle postmodern turn in *Prairie Schooner*. It has increasingly

engaged issues of identity, including gender, sexual, national, and personal identities, and has explored how they are constituted, worked through, and expressed through writing. Raz and Eckersley both understood the significance of material and visual culture and used it, through a visual politics of the cover, to "represent" or "image" the shifting focus of the *Prairie Schooner*.

Significantly, *Prairie Schooner's* mission to publish writing from the Plains is reaffirmed through Raz's commitment to exploring identity through literary and visual discourse. Following the lead of previous editors who had made use, although often tentative use, of the Sheldon Art Gallery collection, Raz and Eckersley have taken advantage of the aesthetic diversity represented in them, an aesthetic diversity that parallels the literary diversity of the publication. In addition, Raz and Eckersley also have used work of contemporary artists on covers as well. A detail of installation artist Barbara Kendrick's wall piece *Caught* was displayed on the cover in Spring 1995 (fig. 2). The image depicts human hair "caught" in numerous cracks. Because of its multiple benign and malignant associations with the human body, the cover generated a considerable controversy.

Perhaps more than any other, Kendrick's cover design reveals the transformation of the *Prairie Schooner* that has occurred under Raz's leadership. She has increasingly allowed visual imagery to take on an independent life of its own, interacting, engaging, and

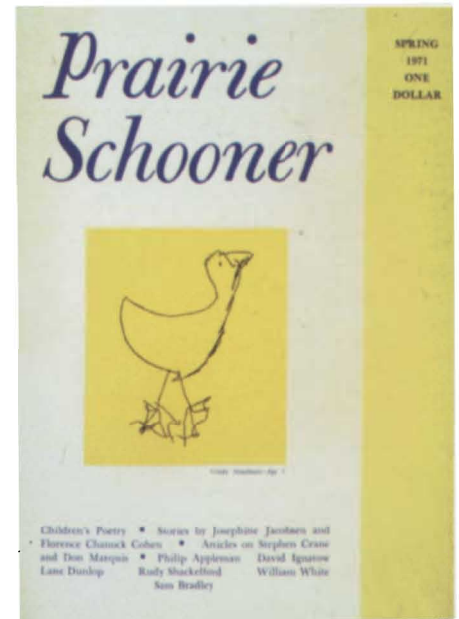


fig. 4, volume 45, no.1 (Spring 1971).

challenging its viewers to make their own associations with the literary content of the magazine. Unlike the careful and managed use of visual imagery of her predecessors, Raz appears to celebrate and revel in the ubiquity of the visual. Far from denying its existence and power or attempting to keep the visual and literary arts "autonomous," Raz is content to work through it and negotiate its compelling but complex presence.

Moreover, Raz's and Eckersley's aggressive aesthetic is intended to communicate the significance of the written word within a culture saturated by visual imagery. These cover designs illustrate the significant relationship between the word and image that intertwine the histories of modern literature and art. *The Visual Culture of Prairie Schooner* suggests that if we isolate word from image, literature from art, we do so to the impoverishment of our appreciation of the beauty and

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Hilda Raz, "Introduction," in Raz, ed. *The Best of Prairie Schooner* (University of Nebraska Press, 2001), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> See Stephen C. Foster, "The Prerequisite Text," in *The Avant-Garde and the Text* (Special Issue), *Visible Language* 21 3/4 (Summer-Autumn 1988): 313-33.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Paul Stewart, "We Are Thirty," *Prairie Schooner* (1956), 315.

<sup>4</sup>David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 53.

<sup>5</sup>See Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> See Shapiro, "Editorial," *Prairie Schooner* (1956): 309-11.

<sup>7</sup> Hilda Raz, "Karl Shapiro," *Prairie Schooner* (2000).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Raz, xvii.



fig. 1, volume 62, no. 2 (Summer 1988) Design by Dika Eckersley

Cover Illustration: Volume 69, no.3 (Fall 1995) Design by Dika Eckersley.



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